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ABSTRACT

The boundaries of the curriculum field are often confused with those of other fields in education. This paper proposes 10 recurring themes, called key concepts, that are unique to the curriculum field. The key concepts, identified from select curriculum textbooks, delineate the field's content, establish its boundaries, and permit a greater understanding of its historical and contemporary significance. The 10 key concepts identified are: (1) sectarianism, (2) definition, (3) organization, (4) curriculum planning processes, (5) curriculum planning personnel, (6) intention, (7) selection, (8) sequence, (9) evaluation, and (10) purpose of education. These key concepts provide boundaries for the curriculum field and eliminate extraneous content from it. (JD)

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Key Concepts of Curriculum:
Toward Identifying a Field

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Key Concepts of Curriculum: Toward Identifying a Field

The curriculum field is recognized as a legitimate component of the larger field of education. Support for this acceptance is provided by common usage of the term curriculum.

Despite its acknowledgment as an authentic element of education, the curriculum field tends to be understood incompletely by both educators and lay persons. This misunderstanding may be attributed to many reasons; however, two seem most instructive. First, the curriculum field traditionally has accepted and valued diversity, a stance that has enriched it immeasurably, but also has blurred its identity within the larger field of education. Second, the field is characterized by an ahistorical viewpoint because both curriculum scholars and practitioners tend to ignore a history that, while sometimes seemingly obscure, has been the object of study and has been explicated (see, for example, Schubert, 1980; Schubert, 1986; Tanner & Tanner, 1980).

A result of these two factors is that the boundaries of the curriculum field often are confused with those of other fields in education. An example of this misunderstanding is found in the diverse contents of books that purport to address curriculum. Such books may include information about instruction, supervision of teachers, facilities planning, and other topics that, while related to curriculum, may not be within the realm of the field.

With these dilemmas in mind, the purpose of this paper is to propose and describe key concepts of curriculum and to begin to provide a degree of identity for a rich, diverse area.

Data Collection and Analysis

This paper proposes ten recurring themes, called key concepts, that are unique to the curriculum field. These key concepts were derived by qualitative analysis of curriculum textbooks. Although collections of curriculum literature have been presented by other authors (see, for example, Fraley, 1981; Schubert, 1980; Schubert, Posner, & Schubert, 1982; Shane, 1981), a unique set of textbooks was compiled for this study. Specifically, prominent curriculum textbooks necessary for a theoretical understanding of American curriculum were recommended by concurrent members of Professors of Curriculum and the Society for the Study of Curriculum History.

The textbooks that were analyzed in chronological order are: Dewey, J. (1902). The child and the curriculum; Bobbitt, F. (1918). The curriculum; Charters, W. W. (1923). Curriculum construction; Rugg, H. (Ed). (1927). The foundations of curriculum making; Caswell, H., and Campbell, D. (1935). Curriculum development; Alberty, H. (1947). Reorganizing the high-school curriculum; Stratemeyer, F., Forkner, H. L., and McKim, M. G. (1947). Developing a curriculum for modern living; Tyler, R. (1950). Basic principles of curriculum and instruction; Saylor, J. G., and Alexander, W. (1954). Curriculum planning for better teaching and learning; Smith, B. O.,

Stanley, W., and Shores, J. H. (1957). Fundamentals of curriculum development; Taba, H. (1962). Curriculum development: Theory and practice; Tanner, D., and Tanner, L. N. (1980). Curriculum development: Theory into practice (2nd ed.); and Schubert, W. H. (1986). Curriculum: Perspective, paradigm, and possibility.

The content of these textbooks was coded, recoded, sorted by codes, and analyzed according to the tenets of the constant comparative method (see Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967 for details of this technique). Ten key concepts were ascertained both during and as a result of this analysis. (See Mullinax, 1989, for further explanation of data collection and analysis techniques.)

Description and Analysis of Key Concepts of Curriculum

Ten key concepts of curriculum were identified: sectarianism, definition, organization, curriculum planning processes, curriculum planning personnel, intention, selection, sequence, evaluation, and purpose of education. These key concepts perform two major functions. First, they provide boundaries for the curriculum field and, second, they eliminate extraneous content. The key concepts present no surprises and, indeed, serve to confirm aspects of conventional wisdom of the field.

The key concepts of curriculum should not be viewed as discrete entities. They are intertwined so tightly that some of them probably could not exist without others. Although this

interrelationship is more apparent between and among certain concepts, it exists for all of them. Another important point is that the key concepts are important collectively as well as separately because, together, they present a relatively complete picture of the curriculum field.

Some persons may argue that important aspects of the curriculum field are not represented in the set of key concepts. It should be kept in mind that the textbooks from which the key concepts were derived reflect the biases and preferences of their authors. It also should be remembered that because an idea was discussed only briefly and consequently is not a key concept does not deny the importance of the idea. Rather, the idea did not receive in-depth treatment in the textbooks.

The remainder of this section provides a description and analysis of each of the 10 key concepts of curriculum.

Key Concept of Sectarianism

The most influential key concept of curriculum is sectarianism. Sectarianism is the state of affairs in which individuals or groups adhere, often tenaciously, to one point of view to the exclusion of other points of view. Supporters of various sects believe that their convictions should be the primary focus of curriculum. Sectarianism was addressed by Dewey (1902), Bobbitt (1918), Charters (1923), Rugg (1927), Stratemeyer, Forkner, and McKim (1947), Taba (1962), Tanner and Tanner (1980), and Schubert (1986).

Sectarianism is the most influential key concept of curriculum because it pervades the other nine key concepts, at least to some degree. Sectarianism alters curriculum thought and decisions in ways that may be understood dimly, if at all, by adherents to different sects. Perhaps sectarianism is prevalent because it is rooted in values, which in turn are embedded in many types of curriculum thought and decisions.

Three sects were identified: the sect of subject matter, the sect of the student, and the sect of society. Adherents to the sect of subject matter submit that the needs of both students and society should be subordinated to the requirements of the academic disciplines. On the other hand, advocates of the sect of the student hold that the needs and interests of students should be the primary catalysts for curriculum thought and action. Finally, supporters of the sect of society emphasize one of three areas: society itself as the basis of curriculum, usefulness of curriculum to society, or reconstruction of existing society through curriculum.

The most interesting point about sectarianism is not its dimensionality, but its presence. The three sects changed little, if any, over time as they were addressed in the textbooks. In addition, each sect was virtually identical throughout each textbook in which the sect was addressed. Sectarianism, regardless of its emphasis, has become woven into the fabric of other aspects of the curriculum field.

Key Concept of Definition

A second key concept is definition, identified as the notion that curriculum may be defined in a number of ways. Definition is influenced by sectarianism because the words included in definitions of curriculum usually reflect the tenets of a particular sect. All of the authors except Dewey (1902), Rugg (1927), and Tyler (1950) discussed definitions of curriculum, provided a unique definition, or both.

Three categories of definitions of curriculum were evident in the textbooks. The first category consists of expectations of some type for students. The second category of definition describes sets of learning experiences or activities, while the third category combines features of the first two.

Like sectarianism, definition is tied closely to other key concepts. The definition of curriculum held by individuals or groups directly impacts many curriculum decisions. For example, if a set of practitioners believes that curriculum consists of all experiences that children have in school, those persons probably will plan a curriculum that is quite different from one developed by a group that conceives of curriculum as a set of structured outcomes.

Key Concept of Organization

A third key concept is organization, which concerns the manner in which the content, experiences, and so on, of the curriculum are structured or arranged for student use and consumption. Organization, a critical issue in the curriculum

field, was the only key concept addressed in all of the textbooks.

Caswell and Campbell (1935) stressed the importance of organization by stating that "perhaps no other point has been an issue of so much dispute in educational theory as the treatment which should be accorded subject matter in instructional organization" (p. 248). The three major dimensions of this key concept, subject-centered organization, student-centered organization, and society-centered organization, clearly reflect sectarianism.

Subject-Centered Organization

The first and most common pattern of organization is subject-centered, which is split into five subcategories. The subcategories and the year in which each was first addressed are: separate subjects (1902), broad fields (1947), units of work (1935), correlation (1957), and disciplinarity (1980).

The separate subjects organization was the most widely discussed variation of subject-centered organization. It was addressed by all of the authors except Bobbitt (1918) and Tyler (1950). Perhaps the separate subjects organization was dominant in the textbooks because, for centuries, it was the only pattern in existence. It appears to have survived the test of time.

Broad fields organization was described first by Albery in 1947 and was mentioned, at least briefly, by each subsequent author except Stratemeyer et al. (1947). Although not as prominent as the separate subjects organization, the broad fields

pattern received a relatively large amount of attention within the textbooks.

Units of work, correlation, and disciplinarity appear to have had minor impact on the curriculum field. Units of work were addressed only by Caswell and Campbell (1935), while correlation was discussed by Smith et al. (1957) and Tanner and Tanner (1980). Disciplinarity likewise received little notice; it was addressed briefly by Tanner and Tanner (1980).

Subject-centered organization is the most conspicuous aspect of the key concept of organization. This dimension, instrumental in early curriculum thought and practice, continues its influence in contemporary education.

Student-Centered Organization

Student-centered organization, the second variation of the key concept of organization, emphasizes the needs or interests or both of students. Student-centered organization has four variations: (a) experience-centered or child-centered, (b) core, (c) projects, and (d) integration.

Experience-centered or child-centered organization was discussed by Caswell and Campbell (1935), Alberty (1947), Stratemeyer et al. (1947), Saylor and Alexander (1954), Smith et al. (1957), and Taba (1962). In experience-centered or child-centered organization, focus is on the needs or interests of students and on presenting content in a way that is both interesting and useful to children. A great deal of attention was given to experience-centered or child-centered organization.

While this dimension of organization was not as prevalent as the separate subjects organization, it was one of the most prominent patterns in the textbooks.

The core concept clearly reflects sectarianism in its student-centered, society-centered, and subject-centered dimensions. The core organization was discussed by Alberty (1947), Tyler (1950), Saylor and Alexander (1954), Smith et al. (1957), Taba (1962), Tanner and Tanner (1980), and Schubert (1986). It received the most attention from writers in the 1940s and 1950s.

The project organization was discussed in five textbooks: Bobbitt (1918), Charters (1923), Alberty (1947), Tanner and Tanner (1980), and Schubert (1986). This aspect of organization did not receive a great deal of attention, despite its radical departure from the separate subjects organization. Perhaps this lack of notice is the case because, as Alberty (1947) asserted, its methods and philosophy have been absorbed into other variations of student-centered organization.

Integration as a means of organizing curriculum was addressed only by Schubert (1986). Integration occurs when students are the primary focus of curriculum and have control over their own learning. Integration may be considered a minor aspect of organization.

Student-centered organization received much attention in the textbooks. The authors noted its experience-centered or child-centered aspect in particular. Student-centered organization may

be considered less prominent than its subject-centered counterpart, but more influential than society-centered organization.

Society-Centered Organization

Society-centered organization was addressed by Bobbitt (1918), Caswell and Campbell (1935), Saylor and Alexander (1954), and Taba (1962). In this aspect of organization, the functions or problems or both of citizens living in modern society are the focus of curriculum. Society-centered organization appears to have had the least impact of any of the three major organization patterns.

Key Concept of Curriculum Planning Processes

A fourth key concept is curriculum planning processes, which relates that curriculum planning should follow a format of some type rather than occur haphazardly. This key concept applies only to concrete activities of planning and does not include descriptions of organization, selection, or other concepts which, perhaps while developed as a result of curriculum planning processes, do not involve actions as such.

This key concept, first addressed by Bobbitt in 1918, appeared in some form in all of the textbooks that followed. Four patterns were evident in the key concept of curriculum planning processes. One, the following concerns were listed in three or more textbooks and therefore may be considered important: (a) determining objectives; (b) sequencing content; (c) selecting content; and (d) studying students, society, and/or

subject matter. Two, determining intention was discussed by Bobbitt (1918), Charters (1923), Rugg (1927), and Caswell and Campbell (1935) in the early part of the 20th century, and then again by Tyler (1950), Saylor and Alexander (1954), and Taba (1962) in mid-century. It appears that the earliest and then the later textbooks were most concerned with the determination of objectives as part of curriculum planning. Three, beginning with the textbook by Alberty (1947), there was an emphasis on determining philosophy and psychology and on studying students, society, and/or subject matter. Four, Caswell and Campbell (1935), Tyler (1950), Saylor and Alexander (1954), and Taba (1962) noted evaluation as a step in the planning process, although most of the other authors mentioned the key concept of evaluation.

A number of curriculum planning processes are common to more than one textbook; however, none of the authors included identical sequences or advocated applying information for the same purposes. For example, Tyler (1950) and Stratemeyer et al. (1947) both recommended analyzing the needs of students as a step in curriculum planning, but the overall processes advocated in these textbooks are quite different. Perhaps the most useful generalization about the key concept of curriculum planning processes is that while a number of procedures have been suggested, there is no single way that the procedures should be used.

Key Concept of Curriculum Planning Personnel

The key concept of curriculum planning personnel is associated with the proposal that specific individuals or groups should plan curriculum. This key concept was addressed by all of the authors except Dewey (1902).

The key concept of curriculum planning personnel is tied closely to the key concept of curriculum planning processes. The persons recommended to engage in curriculum planning include classroom teachers and system level personnel working singly or in concert, as well as students and community members.

Like the key concept of curriculum planning processes, definitive agreement was not provided for the key concept of curriculum planning personnel. The best conclusion about the key concept of curriculum planning personnel is that while the authors recommended persons to plan curriculum, there was little commonality about the precise manner in which individuals or groups should function

Key Concept of Intention

A sixth key concept is intention. Intention, which is influenced greatly by sectarianism, is defined as statements of knowledge or skills or both that students are expected to acquire, experiences students are expected to have, and/or activities in which students are expected to engage as a result of interacting with the curriculum. At least one aspect of intention was addressed by all of the authors except Dewey (1902), Alberty (1947), and Stratemeyer et al. (1947).

Intention is known by a variety of names. Among those used in the textbooks were objectives, goals, and aims. All discussions of intention, regardless of the names assigned to them or their levels of specificity, were included in this key concept. The key concept of intention has five facets: (a) sources of statements of intention, (b) functions of statements of intention, (c) formats of statements of intention, (d) categories of statements of intention, and (e) criteria for selecting statements of intention.

Multiple patterns were evident in these facets. First, sources of intention mentioned in the textbooks are subject matter, the needs of society, and the needs of students. Only two authors (Taba, 1962; Tyler, 1950) listed subject matter as a source of intention, which is interesting in light of the large amount of attention given to subject-centered organization.

Second, there was little accord about the functions of intention. The greatest agreement was seen for assisting with selection of content; development of instructional materials, methods, or both; and evaluation of curriculum.

Third, four textbooks addressed the format of statements of intention. Bobbitt (1918) asserted that statements of intention should be precise and scientific. Tyler (1950) recommended that statements of intention should include descriptions of both student behavior and the content that promotes the behavior. Saylor and Alexander (1954) contended that intention should be stated in terms of outcomes for the entire curriculum. Finally,

Smith et al. (1957) posited that intention should be stated in terms of behaviors that are achievable by students.

Fourth, two generalizations may be drawn about categories of intention: (a) intention usually includes statements about broad behaviors as well as statements concerning more specific behaviors, and (b) intention may be determined by students for themselves or by adults for students. Fifth, there was little commonality among criteria for selecting and/or evaluating statements of intention.

The key concept of intention was noted widely in the textbooks. Although there was agreement about its basic components, there was little uniformity about either the sources or characteristics of the components.

Key Concept of Selection

The key concept of selection includes the notion that the content or experiences or both that constitute the curriculum, regardless of its form or substance, must be chosen from the realm of all possible knowledge and experiences. Selection was addressed by Charters (1923), Rugg (1927), Caswell and Campbell (1935), Stratemeyer et al. (1947), Tyler (1950), Saylor and Alexander (1954), Smith et al. (1957), Taba (1962), and Schubert (1986).

Selection, which is influenced greatly by sectarianism, may be made on the following bases, among others: (a) time needed for instruction, (b) difficulty of content, (c) value of content to adult society, (d) importance of content to a subject field,

(e) student interest, (f) relevance to persistent life situations, (g) relation to statements of intention, (h) satisfaction of learners, (i) longevity of content, (j) publishers' decisions, and (k) pressure from special interest groups.

A lack of agreement was the most noticeable characteristic of the selection criteria suggested in the textbooks. Selection criteria in the textbooks included: (a) usefulness, (b) longevity, (c) relevance to intention, (d) relevance to students' interests, (e) relevance to adult activities, (f) relevance to subject matter, and (g) student satisfaction. Perhaps the best conclusion is that, while selection is important, little agreement exists about the best means to accomplish it.

Key Concept of Sequence

The key concept of sequence addresses the notion that curriculum should be arranged in a temporal order. The key concept of sequence was included in nine textbooks (Alberty, 1947; Caswell & Campbell, 1935; Charters, 1923; Saylor & Alexander, 1954; Schubert, 1986; Stratemeyer et al., 1947; Smith et al., 1957; Taba, 1962; Tyler 1950).

Little consistency was evident among considerations for sequencing curriculum. The criteria specified included: (a) difficulty of learning particular content, (b) students' interests, (c) usefulness of content, (d) the types and amount of prior knowledge needed, (e) the appropriateness of content in

terms of persistent life situations, (f) teacher preference, and (g) consistency with principles of psychology of learning.

These criteria do not appear to be tied to a particular organization or sect. The conclusion may be drawn that sequence is necessary, although there is little uniformity about the best methods to accomplish it.

Key Concept of Evaluation

The ninth key concept, evaluation, addresses the notion that decisions must be made about the value of curriculum. Evaluation was addressed by Rugg (1927), Caswell and Campbell (1935), Stratemeyer et al. (1947), Tyler (1950), Saylor and Alexander (1954), Taba (1962), and Schubert (1986).

Techniques of curriculum evaluation that were suggested include: (a) written tests of student achievement; (b) behavioral objectives; (c) evaluation instruments that are selected or devised; (d) a process including analyzing information, determining hypotheses, and using hypotheses to guide action; (e) goal free evaluation; (f) connoisseurship; and (g) theorizing.

No obvious pattern appeared among the discussions about evaluation, although the scope of comments was wide enough to encompass a variety of concerns. A number of evaluation techniques were recommended, but little commonality among them was evident. Perhaps the best conclusion is that, while curriculum evaluation is important, no consistent methods of achieving it have been developed.

Key Concept of Purpose of Education

The final key concept is purpose of education. This key concept addresses the proposition that education is an enterprise undertaken in order to meet goals that are more or less global, and that, ultimately, all aspects of education are subsumed under these purposes. Purpose of education was discussed by Bobbitt (1918), Charters (1923), Rugg (1927), Caswell and Campbell (1935), Alberty (1947), Stratemeyer et al. (1947), Saylor and Alexander (1954), Smith et al. (1957), Taba (1962), and Tanner and Tanner (1980).

The purposes of education recommended in the textbooks include: (a) to prepare students to function in adult society, (b) to maintain and to improve society, (c) to help students to broaden their interests and to meet their needs, (d) to assist students in applying democratic principles in society, and (e) to transmit traditional academic skills and content. A degree of similarity exists among the purposes of education proposed in the textbooks. This similarity is not that the purposes themselves are alike, but that the purposes reflect sectarianism. The sects of the student, society, and subject matter are visible within the purposes of education proposed in the textbooks. The sect of subject matter is the least prominent, a finding that is interesting because of the emphasis on subject matter within the key concepts of sectarianism and organization.

Interpretation and Commentary

The key concepts of curriculum identified in this paper should not be viewed as terminal findings, but rather should be seen as the result of an initial, exploratory attempt to provide a degree of structure and definition to a complex system of thought and action. Nevertheless, a number of observations and interpretations about the structure, content, and history of the curriculum field are possible from examination of the findings of this study.

One, because of its pervasive nature, sectarianism may be considered the overarching key concept of the curriculum field. Although sectarianism was found to influence all of the other nine key concepts to some degree, it most clearly affected the concepts of definition, organization, intention, selection, and purpose of education.

Two, although Dewey is one of the most influential educators of the 20th century, his legacy was not obvious in this study. Dewey (1902) addressed only the key concepts of sectarianism and organization. Perhaps the effects of this author may be traced through his successors.

Three, only one of the textbooks, that written by Taba (1962), addressed all ten key concepts. The textbooks by Caswell and Campbell (1935) and Saylor and Alexander (1954) included information about all of the key concepts except sectarianism. In addition, Charters (1923) discussed all of the key concepts except evaluation, Stratemeyer et al. (1947) omitted only the key

concept of intention, and Schubert (1986) did not address the key concept of purpose of education. These textbooks may be considered the most comprehensive of those analyzed.

Four, the key concepts of purpose of education, definition, organization, curriculum planning processes, curriculum planning personnel, intention, selection, and sequence generally spanned the entire 1902-1986 period covered by the textbooks. As a result, these seven key concepts may be the most well known of the set.

Five, most of the important ideas in the curriculum field were established by the 1930s. These ideas were refined and elaborated afterwards, but the basic notions and structure of the field were present. This proposition does not suggest that the curriculum field has stagnated since the 1930s, but rather that a foundation for thought and practice had been laid by that time.

Six, the bulk of the information about the key concepts was published between 1935 and 1962. Therefore, this period may be considered an important one for the curriculum field because its basic content was confirmed during this time.

Several conclusions from the preceding observations are possible. First, despite its seemingly diaphanous nature, the curriculum field is a distinct subdivision within the larger field of education. Evidence of this distinction is provided by ten discrete key concepts. In addition, the curriculum field is an essential subcategory of the larger field of education, without which education as it functions today would be unlikely.

Also, the key concepts described in this paper serve as a heuristic for understanding aspects of curriculum history as well as descriptors of the contemporary curriculum field.

Further analysis of the key concepts is desirable in order to provide additional clarification for the curriculum field. For example, research could include analyzing different editions of the textbooks examined in this study to determine the consistency of the key concepts over time. In addition, the key concepts presented in this study could be used as the basis of a quantitative content analysis of curriculum literature.

The key concepts of curriculum identified from select curriculum textbooks provide a degree of definition for a diverse field by delineating its content, establishing its boundaries, and permitting a greater understanding of its historical and contemporary significance. Additional inquiry about the key concepts is necessary for further clarification of the curriculum field.

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